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AUTHOR McInerney, John
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ABSTRACT

There are many ideas for class activities in a first grade whole language classroom that can make the class a richer environment without requiring a lot of time or preparation. "Whole language" is not a set of practices to teach reading; it is a set of beliefs, a philosophy about learning which derives from the notion of keeping learning whole and intact rather than fragmenting it into discrete bites. Activities include: (1) having students make up the rules for the class which are collected and sent home to parents; (2) having students write down one thing remembered from the previous day's lesson (but not grading or collecting it); (3) using pasted-together sheets of paper for students to write a continuing story which is shared with other students; (4) having one student each day write a sentence about something interesting to them which is put onto a "class calendar" and also serves as the class handwriting assignment; (5) tape recording trade books and student-written stories; (6) having students bring in newspaper clippings of global events and posting them on a map of the world; (7) evaluating each student's reading individually by listening to them read; and (8) transferring one student's story onto an overhead and having the class edit it. (RS)

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# Polishing the Whole Act

(text of a presentation made at the Indiana University Fall Language Arts Conference, November 1988)

John McInerney

As a means of introduction, let me just share a few things about myself. My name is John McInerney and this is my 8th year of teaching - 3 at the pre-school and kindergarten level and 5 at the 1st grade level. I teach on the west side of Indianapolis in a school that has a nice mix of middle class, working class, and bused-in inner-city kids. I can't think of a more average school.

I'm a strong advocate for what is currently known as the "whole language" approach to teaching and learning, though I don't think the ideas I'm going to present are limited to those teachers who define themselves that way. I just want to share things that work in whole language rooms that make efficient use of limited time; that is, ideas that can make your class a richer environment, but don't necessarily require a lot of time or preparation.

If you're new to whole language, I'm hoping these ideas will intrigue you and draw you in. If you're an old hand, maybe these can save you some time.

## *Whole Language Defined...Sort Of*

Can I take a moment to try to define whole language? The name itself is unfortunate because it has already been co-opted by basal reader publishers to fit their texts. Whole language is NOT a set of practices or activities to teach reading. It IS a set of beliefs, a philosophy about learning, that affects the entire curriculum. The name derives from the notion of keeping learning whole and intact rather than fragmenting it into discrete bites.

Students are continually creating their own web of knowledge in their brains, building bridges connecting information. When we present a topic in a highly structured, sequential manner, what we are saying to the child is "There is only ONE way to construct those bridges."

In fact, it is the complexity and richness of a task that makes it easier to learn. It's simpler to learn a song than the poem from which it was made. If you forget the words, the music carries you to a point that you remember again. If you forget the music, the words take you to a memorable refrain. Looked at in this light, all knowledge is mutually supportive and, presented in a global, cohesive manner, makes those bridges easier to build.

Whole language is based on the belief that all language - written and oral - is used to accomplish a purpose and that the best means to acquire that language is through actual use. A baby, for example, acquires speech not by practicing its component parts and assembling them at a later date; speech is acquired by speaking, by making mistakes, by getting positive feedback when the speech approximates the conventional. The child, however, doesn't

learn to speak simply in order TO speak. Speech is a tool to accomplish things, to fulfill needs.

So, too, with written language. Children can learn to read by reading and write by writing - getting plenty of positive feedback as it approaches the conventional. Reading and writing are not ends in and of themselves, however. They are a means for personal pleasure. They are also tools for making sense of something else. So, in a whole language classroom, the "something elses" (comparative literature, writing, science, and social studies, for example) assume greater importance while the time spent on formal reading instruction is reduced.

If reading instruction time is reduced, how do the kids get the skills in the first place to do the "something elses"? Glad you asked. That's really the heart of whole language as it relates to reading. Just as we assume and trust that a normal child wants to and will learn to speak (because of all the benefits that accrue to speakers), so must we assume and trust that all normal children want to learn to read. But in traditional instruction, the benefits of reading are not necessarily that compelling - completing a basal reader in order to get another, getting a good grade on a workbook page, reading stories that somebody else tells them they must read, reading stories in a specific order, etc.

For the average and high ability student, this might be enough to get them reading independently. By definition, these kids are sufficiently bright and aware to realize the benefits of reading in spite of less than stimulating instruction. For the low kids, however, the ones more likely to receive highly repetitious and dull "reinforcement", reading is a joyless task that brings no satisfaction whatsoever.

When we pare reading down to drill in letter sounds and word lists, we actually make things harder for the children. For example, the word "said" in isolation is a very difficult word for an early first grader to identify. As one word in an ongoing, interesting story, however, "said" is extremely simple to read because the context supports the word. "Easy" is providing these kids with rich, meaningful stories that comment on their lives or their interests and have some relation to the outside world. That way, they can use all sorts of cues to figure out the text. Recent research out of Michigan reported on in Reading Research Quarterly comments on this. The researchers discovered that dyslexic students were scoring about the same as normal kids on reading comprehension tests. Trying to find out why, they discovered that these kids, not being able to rely solely on their identification of letters, used all sorts of clues such as context syntax, illustrations, etc, to read. They also found that dyslexic students in classrooms that emphasized a skills approach to reading left these kids in the lurch. So, the "something elses" that form a large part of the reading instruction are not frills; they

are the basics. For the average and high students, this provides an opportunity for them to soar in their knowledge. For the low students, it provides the highly stimulating motivation to read. Specific skill instruction is provided on a need-to-know basis and is grounded in real books that are being used for real purposes, not stories contrived to highlight a regular sound pattern.

Journals, book publishing, authors' circles, thematic units, literature study, shared decision making by students and teachers - all figure in a whole language classroom though they don't MAKE a whole language room by themselves.

*First Day, First Grade*

A lot of teachers are interested in whole language, but want to know where to start. The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step, so I always start on day one. I think it bears telling, however, that this is what I do in MY class. I offer this not as a model for the first day, but as an example - ONE example. Take it with a grain of salt.

In any class, you've got to start where the kids are, so the first day, I tell them that they ALL know how to read. As proof, I pull out a collection of print advertising. Any child that's been conscious for 6 years knows "McDonald's", "Pizza Hut", "Burger King," etc.

Then we sit down and I let the kids come up with rules for the class. When a child makes a suggestion, I ask him or her to write it as best they can on a piece of chart paper. For some kids, it means they might just put down X's and O's. Other kids might get just initial consonants and so forth.

Once we've come up with the rules, I write each one down conventionally on separate pieces of construction paper (pointing out how closely some kids came to the correct spelling), each child illustrates a page, we bind it, put a "For Your Comments" sheet on the back cover, and the kids take turns bringing it home to read with their parents.

This combines a lot in one experience. The kids get a chance to write, they're writing for a real PURPOSE (coming up with the actual rules for the class), they're writing for an audience outside of the classroom(their parents), and they can read what's been written (because it's in their own words and is very predictable). For me, I can see how well the kids can express themselves, how sophisticated their letter-sound knowledge they have, and how they use their background knowledge when they read. I can do a mini-lesson on phonics or letter formation or content editing, depending on what I see.

*Science Notebooks*

Here's an easy one that can be as simple or as elaborate as you like. Often in the primary grades, we

ignore note-taking, yet it's easy to incorporate it without taking any additional class time.

As you move into a new unit in science or social studies, create little notebooks for your students. An easy one would be handwriting paper stapled between construction paper. A more attractive one would have dittoed special headings on each page listings all the subtopics along with some illustrations.

Then, for seatwork, have the students write down and illustrate one thing they remember from the previous day's lesson. That's it. You don't need to grade it and spelling certainly doesn't count - it's the effort behind it that's important. At the start of each day's lesson, then, have the kids open their notebooks while you quickly go around glancing at them.

*Revising Stories*

My kids write everyday. Under "Seatwork" on the blackboard, it says "Work on your story." One less ditto to run off and it's more productive. When we meet in small reading groups, they bring their stories and, for the first ten minutes, we'll discuss new developments in the plots.

Now, as you may have guessed, I love computers. The advantage of writing on the computer is the ease of revising, deleting, moving sections of writing around, and inserting new text. When the students don't have a computer, how do you duplicate that ease without having erasers going wild in the room?

Try this. I use glue sticks and regular lined handwriting paper that's been cut in half so the paper is about 5"x8". The students do all their rough drafts on this paper. As the story get's longer, they simply paste a new sheet on the bottom of the old one. The kids love coming to group with their rolled up stories and tossing them in the air to reveal a 12 foot long novel.

The advantages? First, there are no loose papers. Second, the story is always in the proper order. Third, if a section of the story doesn't make sense, it's easy to cut it out and re-attach the remaining two pieces. And fourth, if a child needs to add a section in the middle, it is a simple matter of cutting the story and pasting in one or two new sheets in the middle.

*Calendar Pages*

This is something I've used with great success in my room, doesn't take a lot of time, and reaps potentially high benefits. You need two kinds of paper: lots of construction paper cut in half so you have 6"x9" rectangles and lots of lined handwriting paper cut in half so you have long, skinny 4"x11" rectangles. On a bulletin board, arrange and number the construction paper pieces so that you form a large calendar for the current month. Staple the handwriting paper

together so that each student has a little booklet with about 20-30 pages in it.

Each morning, have a different student write something interesting on the current day's calendar page. It can be something that happened at home, school, or wherever. Tell them to spell it as best they can.

As the child goes out in the hall to write it, start putting that sentence on the board. Ask for student help on how to spell the words correctly. As you write, point out capitalization, punctuation, apostrophes, -ed endings - anything appropriate for your students at that point in the year.

For their seatwork, the students copy this into their handwriting booklet. When the student in the hall returns, look at the sheet, comment on what he or she wrote, point out any correct spellings or close approximations and put the calendar page back where it belongs on the board.

I've found this activity takes about 5-10 minutes each morning but kills a LOT of birds with one quick stone. First, as I write the sentence on the board, I am able to get in quite a bit of spelling and grammar instruction in a painless way. I'm amazed at how easily the students soon incorporate my points into their own writings. Second, it's an easy way to integrate handwriting practice into the room. Third, the calendar pages themselves provide an excellent means of tracking each child's progress in spelling and mechanics over the course of the year. Fourth, the handwriting booklet, which goes home when it is completed, is a good means of parent communication because it is filled with events that have happened in the class. And fifth, the calendar fills an ENTIRE bulletin board for the ENTIRE year. One less to worry about.

*The Tape Recorder, Part 1*

I read to my students every morning but I also like them having access to taped stories during their seatwork time. What I do is simply tape record stories as I read them to the children in the morning. I give one student a kitchen timer that he or she is to ring when I turn the page. Because I buy cheap recording tape, I only put one story on each, so it's easy for the students to find the story they want - it's always at the beginning of the tape.

*The Tape Recorder, Part 2*

I feel like I should do my part to expand the children's minds, even if my own is somewhat closed. When I meet with small groups of children and the rest are doing seatwork, I play classical music in the room on my record player. Here's the best part: whenever a student writes a story in class good enough that we want to put it on a cassette tape, that student is responsible for picking out the appropriate background music to go with the reading. He

or she has to periodically attend to the classical music playing in the room to decide if it goes well with the story. Then, we play that music as the child reads their story into the recorder. It's a nice effect when complete.

*News Bulletin Board*

Put a world map up on a bulletin board and leave a large empty space above it. Bring in two or three interesting newspaper clippings - things kids would be interested in. My first graders love war stories, natural disasters, and scientific discoveries. Pin up the stories and connect them with yarn to the place on the map where they occurred. Encourage the students to bring in any articles they come across.

This provides a simple and effective means for introducing map skills. It also opens the children's minds to the goings on of the outside world. Newspapers are also associated with grown-ups and it makes the kids feel important.

*Evaluating Reading*

Much as I dislike assigning a single reading grade, I am faced with the reality of the report card every nine weeks. Given the fact that a grade is demanded, on what do you base it? Workbook pages and comprehension sheets may give you lots of grades in the grade book but don't really answer the question "Is this child reading well?"

Here's how I handle it. Everyday, during morning group time, 3 different children choose a book to read to the class. I tell them to pick out one they can read comfortably. I also tell them we probably won't have time for them to read the entire book (I save time this way). In my lap, I keep a simple sheet: child's name at the top, date, book being read, comments. There's room for about 10 books on each sheet.

As the child reads, I make brief comments about the kinds of strategies the child is using, expression, dealing with unfamiliar words, etc. When the child finishes, every applauds their effort.

In 9 minutes, I can have those 3 children up and reading. In 9 weeks, I have a sampling of about 8 readings for each child that give me good idea as to their progress. It doesn't really make giving that single letter grade any easier, but at least I feel better knowing that I'm primarily basing the grade on the child's own reading, not on some awkward workbook page

*Group editing*

This is an easy way to introduce the process of editing to the class. With permission, take one student's rough draft of a story, thermo-fax it on to an acetate

sheet, and go through the editing process on the overhead where all the students can see. Remember, the bulk of the discussion should be what the students like about the story and how they would improve the content. Limit the correcting of mechanics to just two or three things that the class as a whole will benefit from seeing.

*Conclusion*

I've touched on a lot of topics and certainly many will want to strongly argue with some points. I wish I had the opportunity to meet with all who object - I think we'd find more similarities than differences. For those who wish to know more about the theory, Ken Goodman's What's Whole in Whole Language, published by Scholastic and available through their book club, is a good, readable introduction.